

Worship, its Spirit and Form.

IT is often assumed that public worship as an institution is collapsing. Such an assumption may be challenged. In other days people were in the habit of attending church regularly, not always in response to a Divine urge but because they were forced by the law of the land, or feared the prejudice of the public. Refusal to attend a place of worship meant both social ostracism and ecclesiastical condemnation. Attendance at church was not only respectable but it was also the safe thing to do. In these days people go to church because, in the main, they wish to go, and they go for no other reason than to worship God. We are therefore in a better position to know exactly where we are regarding the public worship of God.

I. MEANING OF WORSHIP.

It is probable that no two persons in the same building would agree as to what is meant by worshipping God. To one it means sitting down seriously in church, to another repeating prayers, to another, listening attentively to the sermon, to another something else. Worshipping includes all—and more. Yet it is not easy to tell what worship really is. Although the Christian Church has made three hundred official attempts to settle this very important matter, the discontent which exists to-day shows that a settlement to satisfy everybody has not yet been reached. When in doubt, it is always wise to go back to Jesus Christ and try to ascertain His mind on the matter. In this connection, as in all others, we find that He begins with *Individuals*. When He spoke of God and man, and of their relationship one to the other, He said that man need only observe one condition to be acceptable to God, that of worshipping in spirit and in truth. With a right intention and pure motive a man in Christ's name may, on any occasion, and wherever he may be, lift his heart to God with certainty of acceptance. This is real worship. Jesus Christ then leads on to a *Group*. He says, "For where two or three are gathered together in My name there am I in the midst of them." Worship is a necessity because it is first personal and then social. Herein are found the conditions for the best human fellowship. Worship is a necessity to men for this reason only, a fellowship of men and women with heart throbs keeping time as they share one

another's joys and sorrows. Pursuing our quest, we find *Fellowship of the group with God*. "I am in the midst." When individuals who are in the habit of lifting their hearts to God meet in a group, to lift their hearts together to God, there is a unique gathering, a Church, and a Church at worship. A group which meets in the one common name, in common association, with the one common aim to commune with God, to be aware of His presence, to delight in His fellowship—is a group at worship. Worship brings them the experience of Divine influences which cannot be experienced in any other way.

II. THE ACTS OF WORSHIP.

The emotional experience obtained in worship has to be directed along legitimate and approved channels, because the life of God in the soul of man is not only emotional, it is also intellectual; therefore we need a Theology, and needing a Theology we should have the best. An uprush of uncontrolled emotion, or the entire suppression of emotion is the accompanying bad result of a bad Theology. So here again we must lay ourselves open to be guided by the mind of Christ. The act of worship demands that *Men should know God*. This may sound presumptuous, but we cannot worship a God we do not know—and we can know God. We are created to know Him. As children we would find out the cause of movement inside the toy; we were made to seek out the cause of effects. We are no different now. We are after first causes always. In our search our efforts are often misdirected; often we hit the trail and then lose it; sometimes we are on the right path and we do not bother to pursue our efforts. But men have gone on, spasmodically enough it is true—and they have found the Great Secret, that is, the first cause. They have found that the first cause is a spirit, Good and True and Beautiful, revealing himself in many ways—intuition, consciousness, upward tendency—but most clearly in human personality. Those who have seen Jesus Christ have seen Him, seeking for the lost that they might have life. To know God is possible—and to *know* Him is to *worship* Him. The second necessary qualification in worship is that *Men should love God*. This, again, may sound really strange, but men were made to love God. Love is grounded in us. If the human heart can lead men and women into the realms of rapture; the Divine Heart in which there is no evil thought at all can come forth to us and win us, hold us, keep us, and give us a deep peace. When we come to realise that He is the "Love that will not let us go," that He is the "Love from which neither life nor death nor superstition nor fears nor anything else can separate us," we are "lost," not only "in wonder," but "in

Love and Praise." The third qualification in worship is that *Men should serve God.* Men must tend towards the end for which they are made. We are made to serve, and we are saved to give disinterested service. We find our life by giving it away to the Highest. To serve God is not to be a slave. Service for God and for men enriched those who serve, and this exalted idea of life is acknowledged and expressed in worship. Of the redeemed, we read in John's Revelation, "And they fell before the throne on their faces and worshipped God saying, 'Amen: Blessing and Glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be unto our God, for ever and ever,' and 'they serve Him day and night in His temple.'"

It is in these very acts of worship that a man discovers himself, as he knows God, loves God, serves God. Worship includes all that relates to man as expressing his consciousness of the Fatherhood of God; and the consciousness of his own sonship. In this way men come to know that they have sinned, not against law, but against love, and thus they get power of restoration to a state of Filial Fellowship with God. Worship is adoration born of knowledge, reverence born of love, communion born of intimate co-operation. In this way men are vitalised and energised. Their very motives, impulses, and inspirations are in contact with creative reality, and the transformation of their lives is the consequent result. When such men work out in a social and philanthropic way what they know, and feel, they are fulfilling their purpose in the world for the good of humanity and the glory of God.

III. FORM OF WORSHIP.

We need to remember—(1) That which really matters is the Spirit, for there is no worship except in the Holy Ghost. (2) That the Spirit of Religion cannot be separated from its form. As the body is the instrument of the Spirit, so must there be some form to express the spirit of worship. "The word was made flesh." (3) That the form of worship is intended to help men to have corporate communion with God. (4) That no form of worship can be final, so long as God goes on unfolding Himself in the Spirit.

In considering what is the best form of worship to meet the needs of men who differ in taste and temperament, we are helped if we examine Christ's attitude to the form of worship of His day. We find that He went to the Synagogue to worship; and the form of worship there was so simple, that a band of professionals was not necessary to conduct the service because of its many intricacies. A layman like Himself could take a prominent part in the service; so our Christian worship should

conform to the simplicity and naturalness which marked Jesus Christ's own devotional practice.

A very wonderful service in the Upper Room of a humble dwelling-house, in an obscure street, is recorded in Acts. A group of men and women were gathered together for worship, and the Spirit of God blessed them in a wonderful way. The great ceremonial, altar, priest, grand choir and musical instruments were in another part of the town. That is worthy of note. Let us not forget one simple fact of history, when Christianity passed out of Judea to Rome, it not only transformed the world, but was itself transformed by the world, and a world of trouble was born at that time.

The Church of the Empire was different from the Church of Judea; and the Judean type, characterised by simplicity, freshness and naturalness, had to give way to the Roman type, which was august, stately, and awe-inspiring. God had become King again. And the Bible became a book of Laws; sin a rebellion, pardon a great favour. Yes, God was no longer like Jesus, but like the Emperor, stern, imperious, autocratic, distant, one who could only be reached through private secretaries, or officials in long robes, and whose gifts of pardon or blessings would take a long time to come through, perhaps even failing to arrive. All this was so different from the God of Jesus, a Father mingling with His children. The conflict has continued through the centuries, and we see it expressed in prophet and priest, synagogue and temple, inspirational and institutional religion, Jesus and Sadducees, free and liturgical form of worship.

Of vital importance is the stubborn fact that most people in this world form their ideas of God from the way the Church teaches them to draw near to God. The public presentation of religion in public worship decides for most people their idea of religion. And, as we are governed by our ideals, it is of paramount importance that the form of worship we use should help people to form a worthy conception of God, and give them a decent idea of religion. Free Churches are in line with the mind of Jesus Christ regarding their form of worship; we can serve the people of our land best by carrying on in the future, as has been our custom in past years. I do not see the need of drastic reforms in this sphere of our religious life: we must continue to emphasise:—

Preaching as the leading feature in public worship. Perhaps it is difficult to decide what preaching is; but we all know that the preacher is charged with the duty of declaring how man may find God, and when that duty is performed in sincerity and with humility, genuine worship is promoted more successfully by it than by anything else. Canon Streeter says, "People are not tired

of preaching, but of inferior preaching." The new Bishop of Llandaff is calling for preachers, and the Archbishop of York says that his clergy should abandon their ten minute speeches, and preach for at least thirty minutes. It ill behoves us to disparage preaching, as is the custom of many. Instruction always precedes reformation, and we should guard against crowding it out of our order of service.

Praise. As an important feature in our form of worship Who doubts the tremendous power for good in the singing in the Sanctuary? Hymn-singing with worthy accompaniment helps everybody to draw near to the truth of God. It falls short of real worship to allocate the singing entirely to the choir. We do that in concerts, but our church worship is not an entertainment.

Prayer as an important part of worship. The responsibility of preaching is on the minister; the responsibility of praise falls chiefly on the congregation, whilst the prayers are the united efforts of both minister and people. Provision also has to be made for collections, Scripture reading, anthem-singing, voluntaries, stewarding, announcements, &c., but let us always remember that form is human, it is at our command to "adapt, adopt, and improve it." The spirit is divine, and we cannot do as we like with that.

As Free Churchmen, we should use our freedom in making the form of service more expressive of our Spirit; there is no reason why the order should not be changed if there is agreement among the worshippers. Whatever the form may be, the essentials of worship are, order, simplicity, reverence, freedom of Spirit, and continuity of purpose. The really vital thing to guard against is that the form shall not suppress the spirit of fellowship or misrepresent the spirit of truth. A simple service may be a beautiful service, and the permanence of true religion is guaranteed not by forms, but by the spirit in the life of men. As long as the Spirit is with us, He will lead us to devise worthy forms, which, after all, are only means to an end.

God sends His teachers, unto every age,
To every Clime and race of Men,
With Revelation filled for their growth,
And shape of mind.

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